



Pick Your Path to Health

Family Is Forever

Families come in all sizes and shapes, whether the members are related by birth and blood, or by love and togetherness. Women, who do so much for their loved ones, should remember their families are a source of strength for improving their own health.

Research shows people get well faster and stay healthier physically and mentally when they have family and others around them who care and who give them support. At the same time, doing something nice for someone you love can improve your attitude and energy level.

It seems simple and logical, and it is. Something as down-to-earth as eating a meal together on a regular basis may literally boost the immune system, it certainly boosts the spirits, and that can be the first step to healthier living.

"We know that people who have good support systems generally have better mental attitudes and take better care of themselves, and that our mental health affects our immune system," said Dr. Leah Dickstein, Professor of Psychiatry at the University of Louisville in Louisville, Kentucky, and member of the American Medical Woman's Association.

Dickstein referred to a study, sponsored by the Stanford University Medical School, which showed that women who were in support groups with the same stage of breast cancer lived an average of 18 months longer than women who were not in support groups. "Healthy, caring, respectful support helps everyone," Dickstein added.

Large family reunions have the characteristic of passing down stories from one generation to the next. Women should take special note about the family's medical history because some diseases, like some family stories, get passed from generation to generation.

Knowing your family history empowers you because it offers clues about your own health destiny. Now you can take steps to be aware of behaviors that increase your risk and then avoid them. It is already known that heart disease, breast cancer, and diabetes all strike African Americans disproportionately higher than other groups. While doctors don't know all the causes related to these diseases, or all the cures, they know that

watching what you eat, getting regular physical activity, and having screening tests can help prevent them or decrease their severity.

You don't have to attend a big reunion to reap the health benefits of family. Having a mini-family reunion can help women get on the path to better health. Simply reach out to the people you care about, and let them reach out to you. Call a family member or friend who's been out of touch; do something nice for a loved one; and have fun with the people you care about.

Women are so often the caregivers of our society, but taking care of family includes taking care of you too.

Pick Your Path to Health is a national public health education campaign sponsored by the Office on Women's Health within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. For more information about the campaign, please call 1-800-994-WOMAN or 1-888-220-5446 (TDD), or visit the National Women's Health Information Center at <http://www.4woman.gov/> To request weekly health tips by e-mail, click on the box that says, "Click Here for weekly health tips by e-mail."